WALKER EVANS

simple secrets

Whitney Museum of American Art at Champion

ANGELA KRAMER MURPHY

THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF WALKER EVANS

In 1926, a twenty-three-year-old Walker Evans sailed for Paris with vague plans to become a writer and a strong desire to escape the suffocating pragmatism of his Midwestern childhood. He spent the next year attending literature lectures at the Sorbonne and frequenting the city's celebrated cafés and bookstores, where he observed, but dared not approach, literary luminaries such as James Joyce. While in France, he also made a few amateur but inventive snapshots with a vest-pocket camera. When he returned to New York in 1927, Evans continued to experiment with photography and decided, almost arbitrarily, to become a photographer.

In Paris, Evans had remained on the fringes of the art world; in New York, he soon joined a circle of writers and painters that included Hart Crane, a promising young poet. In 1930, Crane selected three Evans photographs to illustrate his epic poem "The Bridge." The photographs depict the Brooklyn Bridge from below and at odd, oblique angles; these early works reveal the influence of European avant-garde photography, with its interest in double exposures and disorienting perspectives.

By 1931, Evans had also befriended Lincoln Kirstein, the energetic and enterprising publisher of the literary journal *Hound & Horn*. Kirstein enlisted Evans in an ambitious project to document neglected Victorian architecture in New York and New England. Although the proposed book was never realized, the project helped establish Evans' style. In contrast to his images of the Brooklyn Bridge, these architectural photographs were straightforward and clear. Evans worked methodically, often returning to a site several times to capture the right light. Yet he chose his subjects intuitively, and found a sort of visual poetry in the decaying facade of an old building.

In many ways, Evans' emerging aesthetic was a reaction against the pervasive influence of photographer Alfred Stieglitz. To Evans, the work of Stieglitz and his followers seemed overly romantic and personal. The young photographer rejected their "artiness" in favor of a more reserved, objective approach. Evans later explained that his aesthetic was shaped not by other photographers, but by writers, especially Gustave Flaubert: "Flaubert's method I think I incorporated almost unconsciously, but anyway used in two ways: his realism and naturalism both, and his objectivity of treatment; the non-appearance of author, the non-subjectivity."[1]

In the early 1930s, Evans found regular employment as a photographer, traveling to Tahiti on a private yacht and to Cuba to illustrate Carleton Beals' *The Crime of Cuba*. In 1935, he photographed African sculpture for The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and traveled to New Orleans in search of antebellum architecture. That summer, the Resettlement Administration (later renamed the Farm Security Administration) hired Evans to document the plight of the rural poor during the Depression.

As a branch of the federal government, the FSA sought to validate the ambitious social programs of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. Evans had little interest in government propaganda, but he was intrigued by the opportunity to record the lives of ordinary Americans. Over the next two years, he traveled

through Ohio, Pennsylvania, and the South, creating memorable pictures of blighted farmland and shabby main streets. In the hands of another photographer, these images might have seemed sentimental or even pathetic, but Evans preserved the quiet dignity of his subjects and avoided obvious ploys to elicit pity. He was scrupulously faithful to the truth and was appalled when FSA colleagues were accused of fabricating scenes.

In the summer of 1936, Evans requested a leave of absence from the FSA in order to accompany writer James Agee on an assignment for *Fortune* magazine to investigate the lives of "typical" Southern tenant farmers. Both men had misgivings about the assignment, and Agee found it distasteful "to pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings, an ignorant and helpless rural family, for the purpose of parading the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation of these lives before another group of human beings...."[2] Nevertheless, Evans and Agee headed south and eventually ended up in Hale County, Alabama, where they met three families living in an isolated group of dilapidated houses. During a month-long stay, Evans photographed the families, their homes, and the surrounding towns, while Agee recorded his impressions of their daily habits and made detailed inventories of their meager possessions.

The draft of the article Agee eventually submitted to *Fortune* was deemed inappropriate for mainstream publication. After years of rewriting, Agee's text was published in 1941 as a book with a separate section

Street Scene, New Orleans, 1936

devoted to Evans' photographs. Yet by then America was on the eve of World War II, and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* seemed like another dreary reminder of a time the nation would just as soon forget. The book was eventually recognized as a classic example of Depression-era reportage, although in many ways it defied the underlying assumption of the genre that literature could effect social change. Similarly, Evans' photographs are often called "documentary," a term that troubled him: "Documentary? That's a very sophisticated and misleading word....The term should be *documentary style*. An example of a literal document would be a police photograph of a murder scene. You see, a document has use, whereas art is really useless."[3]

In 1938, The Museum of Modern Art organized a retrospective of Evans' work, accompanied by a book entitled *American Photographs*. Critical reaction was mixed. The *Washington Post* called the show "a parade of dreary, drab, and depressing scenes."[4] Yet William Carlos Williams wrote, "It is ourselves we see, ourselves lifted from a parochial setting. We see what we have not heretofore realized, ourselves made worthy in our anonymity."[5]

Evans' fascination with the lives of anonymous Americans inspired a series of subway portraits executed between 1938 and 1941 with a camera Evans cleverly concealed in his coat. Despite his reluctance to intrude upon the privacy of strangers he later called himself "a penitent spy and an apologetic voyeur."[6] Evans rode the subway for hours, creating haunting portraits of random commuters caught in unguarded moments.

During World War II, *Time* magazine hired Evans as a film and art critic to replace writers on military leave. After the war, he became a staff photographer and special photographic editor at *Fortune*. With its oversize format and sophisticated printing techniques, *Fortune* was one of the most lavishly produced magazines of its day. Evans helped establish a photographic identity that set *Fortune* apart from other magazines, which often published staged, sensationalized images.

While at *Fortune*, Evans completed his share of tedious assignments, such as taking portraits of leading industrialists. However, he also enjoyed the creative latitude to pursue projects that interested him. In 1947, for example, the magazine sent him to Chicago "on a felicitous mission to follow, on behalf of *Fortune*, where his sharp eye led him."[7] Evans remained at *Fortune* until 1965, when he accepted a teaching position at Yale University.

Throughout his career, Evans was drawn to the incidental art of deteriorating billboards and hand-lettered signs. When he acquired Polaroid's new SX-70 camera in 1973, he began taking instant color photographs of words he found scrawled on street posts and storefronts. He also collected actual signs, discarded rubbish, and other artifacts of American life. He had always been a collector of images; now he was also a collector of objects.

When Evans died in 1975, he left behind a record of an America that had long since vanished. Yet by finding art in the ordinary, transcendence in the mundane, he forever changed our perceptions of American life. In his 1938 introduction to *American Photographs*, Lincoln Kirstein claimed that Evans "evoked for future historians...a powerful monument to our moment."[8] Looking at these images today, we wonder if Evans managed to capture America as it really was, or if our vision of the past has simply been altered by his photography.

Notes

1. Leslie Katz, "Interview with Walker Evans," *Art in America*, 59 (March–April 1971), p. 84.

2. James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941; ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988), p. 7.

3. Katz, "Interview with Walker Evans," p. 87.

4. Quoted in Belinda Rathbone, *Walker Evans: A Biography* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995), p. 164.

5. William Carlos Williams, quoted in John Szarkowski, introduction to *Walker Evans* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1971), p. 16.

6. Walker Evans, quoted in Rathbone, *Walker Evans*, p. 266.

7. *FYI*, Time Inc.'s in-house newsletter, quoted in Rathbone, *Walker Evans*, p. 200.

8. Lincoln Kirstein, "Photographs of America: Walker Evans," in *Walker Evans: American Photographs* (1938; ed. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1988), p. 193.

Alabama Country Fireplace, 1936

All works are from the Collection of Mariam and Benjamin A. Hu
Unless otherwise indicated, all are gelatin silver prints. Dimensions are in inches, followed by centimeters; height precedes width

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Self-Portrait, Juan Les Pins, France, 1927
4½ x 3 (11.4 x 7.6)

Building Facade, New York, 1928
2⅜ x 1½ (6 x 3.8)

Grate, Bronx, 1928
2½ x 1¾ (6.4 x 3.5)

Mannequin, New York, 1928
8 x 5⅛ (20.3 x 13)

Cranes and Windows, New York, c. 1928–29
2½ x 1⅝ (6.4 x 4.1)

Brooklyn Bridge Composition, New York, 1929
2⅜ x 4 (6 x 10.2)

Brooklyn Bridge, New York, 1929, printed 1994 by Jon Goodman, from the portfolio *The Brooklyn Bridge*
Modern photogrovure from the originol film negotive, 9⅞ x 5⅞ (25.1 x 14.9)

Building with Metal Gate, probably Brooklyn, 1929
2½ x 1⅝ (6.4 x 4.1)

Delancey Street, New York, 1929
2½ x 1⅝ (6.4 x 4.1)

East River, New York, 1929
2½ x 1½ (6.4 x 3.8)

Forty-Second Street, New York, 1929
6¼ x 9¼ (15.9 x 23.5)

Hart Crane, Brooklyn, New York, 1929
3⅜ x 3 (8.6 x 7.6)

Paul Grotz, Darien, Connecticut, 1929
3¼ x 2¼ (8.3 x 5.7)

Wall Street Windows, 1929
1⅞ x 2½ (4.8 x 6.7)

Berenice Abbott, 1930
6⅝ x 4⅜ (16.8 x 11.7)

Secondhand Shop Window, 1930
4½ x 6½ (11.4 x 16.5)

View of Ossining, New York, 1930
4¾ x 7½ (12.1 x 19.1)

Wood Shingles, 1930
6⅜ x 4½ (16.2 x 11.4)

Circus Signboard, c. 1930
8⅝ x 6⅝ (21.9 x 16.2)

Clothes Line and Smoke Stacks, New York, c. 1930
8⅛ x 9 (20.6 x 22.9)

Wash Day, New York, c. 1930
7⅜ x 4⅞ (18.7 x 12.4)

Window of a Shingled House, c. 1930
6⅜ x 4½ (16.2 x 11.4)

Gingerbread House, Dedham, Massachusetts, c. 1930–31
3¾ x 5⅜ (9.5 x 13.7)

Jigsaw House, Ocean City, New Jersey, 1931
5½ x 7 (14 x 17.8)

Main Street, Saratoga Springs, New York, 1931, printed c. 1970
8½ x 6½ (21.6 x 16.5)

Mirror, Saratoga Springs, New York, 1931
7¾ x 6 (19.7 x 15.2)

Roxbury Water Tower, Massachusetts, 1931
6¼ x 3⅜ (15.9 x 8.6)

Moving Truck and Bureau Mirror, c. 1931
4⅝ x 6⅝ (11.7 x 16.8)

Child in Backyard, 1932
7½ x 5¾ (19.1 x 14.6)

South Street, New York, 1932
5⅛ x 7⅝ (13 x 19.7)

Tahiti, 1932
6⅛ x 7⅜ (15.9 x 19.1)

Bread Line, Havana, 1933
6⅝ x 8¼ (16.8 x 21.3)

Coal Loader, Havana, 1933
6⅝ x 4½ (16.5 x 11.7)

Courtyard, Havana, 1933
6 x 7⅞ (15.2 x 20)

Cuban Sugar Worker, 1933
4⅞ x 6½ (12.4 x 16.5)

General Store, Cuba, 1933
5⅞ x 7⅝ (14.9 x 19.4)

Breakfast Room, Belle Grove Plantation, White Castle, Louisiana, 1935, printed c. 1970
7⅛ x 9¼ (18.1 x 23.5)

Figure, Surmounting a Calabash, Urua Belgian Congo, 1935
9 x 7¾ (22.9 x 18.7)

Five Fly Whisks with Carved Handles, Baule, Ivory Coast, 1935
9⅛ x 7⅛ (23.2 x 18.1)

The Henry McAlpin House ("The Hermitage") near Savannah, Georgia, 1935
7½ x 8½ (19.1 x 22.5)

Jane Ninas, Belle Grove Plantation, White Castle, Louisiana, 1935
4⅜ x 3⅜ (11.1 x 8.6)

Louisiana Factory and Houses, 1935
7⅜ x 12¼ (18.7 x 31.1)

Mask, WaRegga, Belgian Congo, 1935
8 x 5½ (20.3 x 14)

Part of Morgantown, West Virginia, 1935
7 x 9 (17.8 x 22.9)

Sculptural Figure, Loango, French Congo: Profile, Front, and Back Views, 1935
7½ x 3¼ (19.1 x 8.3) each

Man with Cigar, Southeastern U.S., c. 1935
6⅜ x 5¾ (16.2 x 14.6)

Prison Work Gang, Southeastern U.S., c. 1935
5½ x 6¾ (14 x 17.1)

Alabama Country Fireplace, 1936
9⅝ x 7⅝ (24.4 x 19.4)

Battlefield Monument, Vicksburg, Mississippi, 1936
5⅜ x 3⅜ (13.7 x 8.6)

Battlefield Monument, Vicksburg, Mississippi, 1936
7¼ x 8 (18.4 x 20.3)

Church Organ and Pews, 1936, printed c. 1970
7½ x 9½ (19.1 x 24.1)

Easton, Pennsylvania, 1936
3⅜ x 5⅜ (8.6 x 13.7)

Frame Houses in Virginia, 1936
3⅜ x 5⅜ (8.6 x 13.7)

Frame Houses in Virginia, 1936
6 x 4¾ (15.2 x 12.1)

Furniture Store Sign near Birmingham, Alabama, 1936, printed c. 1970
7½ x 9½ (19.1 x 24.1)

Minstrel Showbill, 1936
6¾ x 5¾ (17.1 x 14.6)

Penny Picture Display, Savannah, Georgia, 1936
3⅜ x 5⅜ (8.6 x 13.7)

Penny Picture Display, Savannah, Georgia, 1936, printed 1974, from the portfolio *Walker Evans: Selected Photographs*
12⅞ x 10⅛ (32.7 x 26.4)

Porch Grillwork, Mobile, Alabama, 1936
5⅝ x 7⅛ (14.3 x 18.7)

Southern Farmland, 1936
5¾ x 8¾ (14.6 x 22.2)

Sprott, Alabama, 1936
8½ x 7¼ (21.6 x 18.4)

Star Pressing Club, Vicksburg, Mississippi, 1936
6½ x 6 (16.5 x 15.2)

Street Scene, New Orleans, 1936
6⅛ x 7⅛ (15.6 x 18.1)

Portrait of James Agee, Old Field Point, New York, 1937
4¾ x 3½ (12.1 x 8.9)

S. Klein's Department Store, New York, 1937
5½ x 6¼ (14 x 15.9)

Subway Portrait, New York, 1938
2¾ x 2 (7 x 5.1)

Subway Portrait, New York, 1938
5 x 7½ (12.7 x 19.1)

Subway Portrait, New York, 1938
5½ x 8¼ (14 x 21)

Subway Portrait, New York, 1938
5½ x 8¼ (14 x 21)

Grave, Florida, 1941
5½ x 6½ (14 x 16.5)

Memorial Day Parade, Bridgeport, Connecticut, 1941
3½ x 3½ (9.8 x 8.9)

Memorial Day Parade, Bridgeport, Connecticut, 1941
7¼ x 4½ (19.7 x 11.4)

Municipal Trailer Camp, Sarasota, Florida, 1941
6¾ x 8¼ (17.1 x 21)

Palm Trees, The Gulf of Mexico, Florida, 1941
7½ x 5⅞ (19.1 x 14.9)

Pelican, Florida, 1941
6¼ x 5 (15.9 x 12.7)

Recreational Vehicle, Florida, 1941
5⅝ x 7⅝ (14.3 x 19.4)

Uninhabited Residence, near Sarasota, Florida, 1941
5¾ x 7⅛ (14.6 x 18.1)

Halsted Street, Chicago, 1946
7⅝ x 5⅛ (19.4 x 13.3)

Man on the Street, Detroit, 1946
5¾ x 6½ (14.6 x 16.5)

Man on the Street, Detroit, 1946
6 x 7⅝ (15.2 x 19.7)

Shoppers, Randolph Street, Chicago, 1946
15½ x 12¾ (39.4 x 31.1)

Two Junked Boilers, probably Detroit, 1946
2⅛ x 2⅛ (5.4 x 5.4)

"The Superrench"—Two-Ended Wrench, 1955
9½ x 7½ (24.1 x 19.1)

Parlor Chairs, Oldwick, New Jersey, 1958
5¾ x 4½ (14.6 x 11.4)

Stove, Heliker House, Cranberry Island, Maine, 1969
12¾ x 8⅝ (32.4 x 22.2)

Audrey, Atlanta, 1973
8⅜ x 8⅛ (21.6 x 21.3)

Graffiti: "Here", 1974
Polaroid SX-70 print, 3⅛ x 3⅛ (7.9 x 7.9)

Graffiti on Red Pole, 1974
Polaroid SX-70 print, 3⅛ x 3⅛ (7.8 x 7.8)

PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE COLLECTION OF
MARIAN AND BENJAMIN A. HILL

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